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## POLISH LITERATURE IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION 1999–2009

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**Abstract:** In the period under consideration 265 Polish titles (poetry, drama, prose fiction, reportage and memoirs) were published in English. Their publishers were mostly academic presses and small independent publishers, often subsidised by the EU or the Polish Book Institute. The analysis of the titles leads to several conclusions. First, the image of Polish literature construed on the basis of the available translations did not reflect the situation on the Polish book market. The percentage of translated poetry volumes and memoirs devoted to the Holocaust and the Second World War was much higher than the percentage of such titles published in Poland. Second, the beginning of the decade concentrated on classics and memoirs, whereas towards the end of the period more and more contemporary prose titles were being published. Third, the increased interest in Polish prose among the British publishers was not reflected among their American counterparts. The article is accompanied by a bibliography of English translations of Polish literature published in the years 1999–2009.

**Keywords:** Polish literature in English translation, reception of Polish literature in the United Kingdom and the United States.

The 1999–2009 decade can be viewed as a period when Poland drew nearer to West European countries. Among the changes brought about by Poland's accession to the NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004 we can certainly list the growth in importance of the Polish language (Miodunka 2006). When Poland entered the EU, Polish became the Union's biggest Slavic language and the sixth language with respect to the number of native speakers. As the Polish language joined the official languages of the EU, there appeared an increasing need to translate into and from Polish. Thinking about literary translations, we could pose a question whether the rise in the international value of the Polish language has had any impact on

the position of Polish literature on foreign book markets. Undoubtedly, the largest and the most influential of those markets is the English-language one, hence the present discussion focuses on the works of Polish literature which appeared in English translation from 1999 to 2009.

As the position of Polish literature on British and American book markets depends to a large extent on the general situation of foreign literatures translated into English, I would like to outline a broader context in which translated works function before I elaborate on translations of Polish literature. To sketch the broader context I will rely on three independent reports investigating the position of translated literatures in the English-speaking world; these reports were published in 2004, 2007 and 2009.

## Translated literatures on American and British book markets

According to the report prepared for the European Commission in 2004, the number of literary translations in Europe started to fall, rather than to rise given globalisation. While the year 1980 saw 52,070 translations, in 1994 only 50,343 translated titles were published. Within these numbers, more than 50% of the books translated globally were translations **from** English, whereas all other languages translated **into** English constituted only 6%. The report closes with a future forecast: “the proportion of the English language will be expanding” and with German and French coming second and third “these top three languages will account for three out of every four translations worldwide” (European Commission 2004: 53). The analysis of the European book market concluded with the observation that “the ‘double nature’ of books as an economic product and an item of cultural value (and identity) can be seen as assuming a new and very real prominence” (2004: 54). It was pointed out that publishers had become increasingly aware of the costs the publication of foreign titles entailed because the prices for translation rights had risen significantly and the financial risk associated with publishing translations from less prominent languages was greater than before.

More recent data can be found in the report prepared by Miha Kovač and Rüdiger Wischenbart, which was presented at the London Book Fair in 2010. The authors of the research focused on best-selling book patterns in Western, Central and Eastern Europe, analysing top 10 best-seller lists. Their findings showed that translations from English constituted on aver-

age one third of the top segment, with some variations across different countries. In Sweden, for instance, more than two thirds of best-selling authors wrote in Swedish, while at the other end of the scale, in Poland, Slovenia and Spain, “domestic writers seem to have a much harder time finding a large home base among readers” (Kovač and Wischenbart 2009: 11–12). Spain, Poland and Italy were the most open book markets, whereas the UK and France belonged to markets “most difficult to be penetrated by translations” (2009: 16). The most disconcerting conclusion of the report suggested that, even though various authors from smaller countries, such as Denmark or Portugal, did occasionally appear on European best-seller lists, “not a single writer from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, or Serbia entered the top segment in the ‘West,’ as if 1989 had never happened” (2009: 26). Hence, the survey concluded that the English language was both “a bottleneck and a driving force:” entering a UK best-seller list was a privilege for only a very small number of translated authors, yet those translations into English acted as an important “launch pad” for their international careers. However, as a rule this privilege was denied to writers from Central and Eastern Europe, who had virtually no access to the “exclusive club” formed by West European authors (2009: 31).

The results of the third research, this time of a worldwide scope, were published in 2007 by the PEN Association and Institut Ramon Llull under the telling title “To Be Translated or Not To Be.” This extensive report aimed to remind us that translation is “the lifeblood which sustains and nurtures literatures” and makes the dialogue between them possible (PEN 2007: 12). The research analysed the statistical data for 2004, when the total number of books published in English worldwide was 375,000, with new translations amounting to 14,440, which constituted a little more than 3% of all books available for sale. Most of those translations were non-literary: textbooks or computer manuals. When it came to literary translations, only 874 titles were published in the United States, many of them retranslations of the classics.

The report also included statistical details about fiction books translated into English from different languages and published in the US between 2000 and 2006. There were 13 titles translated from Polish (average of 2.6 per year) and placed Poland behind France – 52, Italy – 39, Germany/Austria/Switzerland – 36, and Russia – 29, but for instance before Norway and Spain – both 12, Greece – 8, Hungary – 7, and Slovakia, Lithuania and

Estonia – 1. On the basis of the data the authors of the report concluded that “English-speaking cultures should open themselves and increase the number of translations into English if they want to be a real bridge between literatures” (2007: 10). They emphasized not only the limited opportunity for native speakers of English to interact with other literary traditions, but also the influence English as a modern *lingua franca* has on the entire world literature. Therefore, English as a transnational language should become a facilitator enhancing encounters between various languages, rather than a “roadblock to global discourse” (2007: 23).

As presented in the three reports, the situation of translated literature looks rather dire. For a contemporary living author from a non-English speaking country to be translated and published in English is an almost Herculean feat. If the writer comes from a Central or East European country, his or her position is even more precarious. According to Natalie Levisalles, for 300 literary translations published each year in the United States, only 1–3% of titles are translated from languages such as Polish or Czech, while works originally written in German and French are most frequently translated (Levisalles 2004: 54–59). As scholars and writers have observed with concern, translations constitute such an inconspicuous fraction of literature published in English that they become almost invisible on the book market. The cause of this predicament is not very clear.

Academics and writers themselves tend to blame publishers and their policies. It has been pointed out that the fall in the number of translations published in English after the Second World War has coincided with mergers in American publishing industry, when small independent publishers were transformed into big publishing houses (Hale 2009: 219). At present, more often than before, publishers see a book not as a cultural value, but rather as a marketable product which should generate a substantial financial profit. Moreover, the way in which the position of the editor responsible for the selection of titles to be translated is perceived may influence the publishing process. While in bigger European publishing houses there are usually several editors employed, each of them reading in three or four languages, some of American publishing conglomerates do not even have one such editor, and the task of reading foreign titles is relegated to a person who happens to know the language in question (Levisalles 2004: 55–56).

However, besides conglomerate international publishing houses, there exist numerous cultural and academic presses which play a more significant role in promoting translations. It has been argued that both in the US

and in the UK “the burden of bringing new international writers onto the (...) market falls upon the small presses” (Schulte 1990: 1–2). Smaller publishers often specialise in a specific type of books or in a particular cultural area. Yet because most of these publishing initiatives are not run for profit, all too often they find themselves in a harsh financial situation. Some of the university presses running entire series of translated works announced that they would no longer be publishing translations or they started to reduce the number of translations they publish. Donna Shear, director of the Northwestern University Press, justified such a decision by stating that “it’s expensive, and the sales aren’t there. This is definitely a trend in the university press world” (Kinzer 2003).

To account for their frequent discrimination against translated works, publishers quote the difficult and precarious position of translations on the book market. This precariousness to some degree reflects the readership preferences. Readers whose first language is English are claimed to be generally less culturally open and less prepared to embrace other viewpoints than people from the rest of Europe. Robert Baensch from the Center for Publishing at the New York University subscribes to that opinion, stating that “for the American consumer, if something is too foreign, it won’t be accepted. Foreign is okay for restaurants, not for books” (Levisalles 2004: 56). The PEN report also concurs with this view, recounting that research on the English-speaking countries reveals “an overriding attitude of self-sufficiency,” creating “a closed, self-sufficient setting” (PEN 2007: 119). Hence a vicious circle: publishers do not venture to publish literature which is not meaningful to English-speaking readers, in case it cannot be sold; whereas readers are not offered the possibility of encountering other cultures in literature and they linger in their “self-sufficient” monolingualism.

To alleviate this situation, many initiatives have been launched; in recent years a discussion on literary translation has been taking place across Europe and America. PEN International formulated a coherent policy aimed at increasing the number of literary translations into English. It consists of three types of initiatives: (1) programmes carried out on “an issue-oriented, trans-regional basis,” (2) programmes supporting translators and publishers of translated works, and (3) initiatives making use of the Internet as a global tool of communication (PEN 2007: 93). The initiatives of the first type aim at bringing together people from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds to exchange translation experience, practice and ideas, and to prepare ground for their possible cooperation in the future. An example of

such an event in the United States may be the annual PEN “World Voices Festival of International Literature” launched in 2005. In 2010 it already gathered 150 writers from 40 countries, with Poland represented by Andrzej Stasiuk. Another event, launched in 2005 in the US, is “Reading the World – May as World-in-Translation Month,” which consists in collaboration between booksellers and publishers to make translated voices more popular across America by promoting translated books and organising readings. In the UK one of the most important literary translation events is the W. G. Sebald lecture organised by the British Centre for Literary Translation, founded at the University of East Anglia in 1989. The lecture, held annually in London, is followed by a ceremony of awarding prizes for translations from several world languages. Other literary events which bring translated literature to the readers’ attention include, for instance, the *Guardian*’s “Hay Festival of Literature” or the Edinburgh International Book Festival. What seems to be a crucial breakthrough in the attempts to bring more recognition to translators and their work is the fact that in 2010 the annual London Book Fair for the first time in its history featured the Literary Translation Centre, which brought together translators and writers from all over the world in a series of lively debates and seminars.

The second type of initiatives supports translators, and translations, by means of grants, prizes and residencies. Such assistance is crucial because in most countries the literary translator’s profession receives little recognition; what is more, the remuneration for that demanding and time-consuming work is usually relatively low. Apart from bringing recognition to translators, grants and prizes allow them to take a break from other commitments and focus solely on their translatory work.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in recent years more and more programmes offering subsidies to the publishers who have published or consider publishing translated works have been

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<sup>1</sup> In the United States, the most prestigious translations grants included: prizes awarded by the PEN Translation Fund, established in 2003 (in 2008 Mira Rosenthal was awarded one to translate Tomasz Różycki’s poems, and William Martin to translate Karol Irzykowski’s novel *Paluba*); the National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellowships supporting English translations of world literature (Mira Rosenthal received one in 2009); and the Best Translated Book Award, whose 2010 longlist featured Bill Johnston’s translation of *The Mighty Angel* by Jerzy Pilch. In the UK, in 2004 the English branch of PEN launched a programme entitled English PEN’s Writers in Translation which consists in grants for the promotion and marketing of translated works. Each year six to eight writers are supported, and one of the titles chosen for year 2010 was Antonia Lloyd-Jones’s translation of *Like Eating a Stone* by Wojciech Tochman.

launched. Such initiatives are essential from the publishers' point of view because, as mentioned above, publishing translation is often regarded as a financially risky and hazardous enterprise. Publishers from the EU countries can also apply for funding to the European Commission, which runs the "Culture 2007–2013" programme, supporting translations of fiction from one European language into another. In addition, government cultural agencies, such as the Polish Book Institute (Instytut Książki) in Poland, offer publishers considerable funding for translations into English.

The third type of initiatives involves establishing Internet-based platforms to promote international literature among the English-speaking readership and to serve as a meeting point of different cultures and languages. It seems to be particularly important at present, since the Internet has become a tool enabling the fastest exchange of information and almost limitless communication. One of such platforms is Words Without Borders which, as the declaration on their home page states, "opens doors to international exchange through translation, publication, and promotion of the best international literature" ([www.wordswithoutborders.org](http://www.wordswithoutborders.org)). Every month a new issue of a magazine containing literary translations from a different part of the world is published. The website features also numerous forums devoted to literature in translation. The creators of the platform have managed to publish four anthologies of translations; the second one, *Words Without Borders: The World Through the Eyes of Writers* (2007), contains works by Czesław Miłosz and Wisława Szymborska, and the third one, *The Wall in My Head: Words and Images from the Fall of the Iron Curtain* (2009), includes writing by Ryszard Kapuściński, Andrzej Stasiuk and Dorota Masłowska.

Another virtual platform for literary exchange is run by Literature Across Frontiers, which has created a network of partner organisations "aiming to advance European cultural exchange in the field of literature and translation through multilateral cooperation encompassing policy research and analysis, publications, translator training and skills development, joint participation in international book fairs, literature festivals and other forums, organisation of larger-scale projects, as well as conferences, seminars and workshops" ([www.lit-across-frontiers.org](http://www.lit-across-frontiers.org)). They organise poetry and prose translation workshops in various countries, participate in international book fairs, as well as publish a series of anthologies of contemporary poetry entitled *New Voices from Europe and Beyond*. The fifth volume, published in 2009, presents six Polish poets: Jacek Dehnel, Ag-

nieszka Kuciak, Anna Piwkowska, Tomasz Różycki, Dariusz Suska, and Maciej Woźniak. There are of course many more websites actively promoting international dialogue between different literary traditions. The sheer number of such initiatives shows that, next to the printed word, translanguag encounters occur also in virtual space.

## Polish literature in English translation

I hope this brief overview of the American and British translated book markets offers a useful background for my discussion of Polish titles published in English. As the statistical analysis of the 1999–2009 period shows, 265 Polish titles (poetry, drama, prose fiction, reportage and memoirs) appeared in the book form (the full list in the appendix): 185 translations were published in the United States, 94 in Great Britain, 28 in Poland, and the rest – 35 titles – in countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand or Sweden (74 titles were published simultaneously in two different countries).

A study of the profiles of the publishers who publish Polish authors has confirmed the validity of the hypothesis put forward in the PEN report stating that it is mainly cultural and university presses who decide to publish translated literature. In the US, the leading publishers of Polish literature are: Northwestern University Press, Ohio University Press, Open Letter, Hippocrene Books, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Archipelago Books, Dalkey Archive Press, Alfred A. Knopf, and Zephyr Press. The first three publishers are university presses. Farrar, Straus and Giroux and Alfred A. Knopf are small, but renowned publishers of belles lettres. Archipelago Books and Dalkey Archive Press, on the other hand, are little publishing enterprises set up to promote world literature in the United States. In the UK, the publishers displaying considerable interest in publishing translations from Polish are Faber & Faber, Portobello Books, Arc Publications, and Serpent's Tail. The first two publishers are large enterprises that invest primarily in authors with recognizable names, such as Wisława Szymborska, Stanisław Lem, Sławomir Mrożek or Czesław Miłosz. The other publishers are small, independent presses publishing many younger authors who are just making their debuts. In the period under consideration, there were also a number of publishers that published only single works translated from Polish, and individuals who decided to publish English translations of their works at their own expense. It is a common practice in the case



of diaries and memoirs from the Holocaust and the Second World War. Moreover, a few translations were published in Poland every year; here, the Wydawnictwo Literackie series of bilingual poetry volumes deserved attention.

The analysis of the names published by particular presses shows that, while bigger publishers focus mainly on established authors with prestigious prizes, such as the Nobel Prize, the burden of promoting new contemporary writers rests to a great extent on small independent publishers. Primarily non-commercial and non-profit initiatives, supported by various cultural institutions, they rely heavily on donations, since their titles seldom reach best-seller lists. As the founder of the Dalkey Archive Press confessed in an interview, “we are dependent upon donations and grants to make possible what we do. (...) Without their [funders’] support, the Press could not have survived” ([www.dalkeyarchive.com/aboutus](http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/aboutus)).

That brings me to the subject of subsidies and grants available for publishers and translators of Polish literature into English. Apart from the grants awarded by the EU Commission, presses intending to publish a translation of a Polish literary work may apply for a government grant to the Polish Ministry of Culture via the Polish Book Institute. Such a financial support within the ©POLAND Translation Programme covers up to 100% of the costs of translation and up to 100% of the costs of the acquisition of rights. Titles eligible for the grants should belong to one of the four categories listed on the website of the Polish Book Institute: (1) fiction and essay, (2) broadly conceived humanities, (3) children’s and young people’s literature, and (4) non-fiction. From 2001 to 2009, the English translations of 39 books were subsidised within this programme. Besides the grants, the Polish Book Institute together with the Jagiellonian University and the Villa Decius Association run the Translator’s Collegium programme, which each year allows eight translators to come to Kraków for study visits (it pays for their travel and accommodation). Among the translators who have profited from the programme so far are Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Danuta Borchardt, Jennifer Lee Croft, Benjamin Paloff and William Martin. The third type of support for translators offered by the Polish Book Institute is the Found in Translation Award, established in 2008 in cooperation with the W.A.B. Publishing House and awarded annually to the author of the best translation of a work of Polish literature into English. The recipients include Bill Johnston, Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Danuta Borchardt, Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak.

The initiatives launched by the Polish Book Institute prove that the Institute has been providing support for Polish-English translators. However, such a financial support for each and every publication of Polish literature abroad is impossible, as the data for 1999–2009 demonstrate that the subsidized titles amounted merely to 15% of all the literary works translated from Polish into English. The remaining 85% had to compete on the English-language book market against all the books written originally in English or translated into English from other languages. Publishers are well aware that such titles are unlikely to win popularity, since they are not what an average English-speaking reader looks for. There are, however, institutions that seek to improve this situation by actively promoting Polish literature and culture abroad, such as the Polish Cultural Institutes in London and New York sponsored by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Out of all the translations published between 1999 and 2009, more than 33% were translations of poetry, 60% were prose translations and about 6% were translations of dramatic works. The numbers for each year are presented in Figure 1.

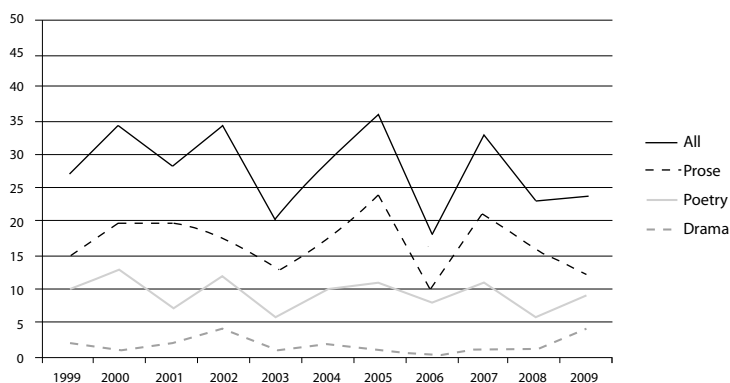


Figure 1. Polish literary works in English translation according to genre

The relatively high percentage of poetry translations may surprise. By comparison, in 2008 poetry and drama constituted only 2.1% of all literary works published in the United States (Bowker 2010). This considerable popularity of Polish poetry in translation may be partly due to the fact that the last two Polish Nobel Prize winners were poets, and the prestige of the award brought about the increase in the number of translations of

their works. Both Czesław Miłosz's and Wisława Szymborska's volumes are among the titles most frequently reprinted. In the United States, Adam Zagajewski's poetry has been regularly published in translation.

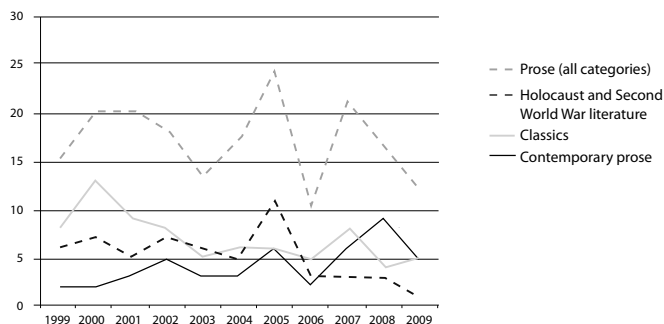


Figure 2. Polish prose in English translation 1999–2009

When it comes to translated prose titles, it is possible to classify them into three large categories: classics, contemporary prose and the Holocaust and Second World War literature. The first category comprises works by widely recognized authors, hence relatively safe publishing endeavours. They are brought out mainly by large publishing houses. Among those most frequently translated in the last decade are: Ryszard Kapuściński, Witold Gombrowicz, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Stanisław Lem, Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz. The interest in these writers is also conditioned by external factors, such as the release of a new Hollywood adaption of Lem's *Solaris* in 2002 (the translation was reprinted in 2002 and 2003), the centenary of Gombrowicz's birth in 2004 (declared the Gombrowicz Year; three new translations of his works appeared then) or the media attention devoted to Kapuściński after his death in 2007 (six new translations came out that year).

The second category of prose translations are the works of contemporary fiction by the living authors who have earned critical acclaim in Poland, but have been yet relatively unknown to the English-speaking readership in general. Such writers include Olga Tokarczuk, Paweł Huelle, Andrzej Stasiuk, Jerzy Pilch, Magdalena Tulli, Stefan Chwin, and Dorota Masłowska. In contrast with the classics, their works are published mainly by small independent, often non-profit, publishers whose mission is to seek out and bring to readers' attention new interesting titles of world fiction.

The third category consists of narratives that keep the memory of the Second World War and Holocaust alive. The majority of such translations are produced by small publishers or by authors themselves. It does not mean, however, that the number is small – it accounts for 30% of all prose works translated in the period under consideration. Here the names range from recognizable Hanna Krall, Tadeusz Borowski and Władysław Szpilman to writers relatively unknown in Poland, who after the Second World War emigrated to the United States, Great Britain, or Australia, and only there decided to write down their memories. Their memoirs or diaries were originally written in Polish and translated into English only later, often for younger generations who, having been brought up abroad, were no longer able to read the family histories in Polish. This type of literature may enjoy a greater popularity among foreign readers (rather than Polish), since it appears to fill a particular niche in the English-language book market, where fewer publications about the Second World War experience and the post-Holocaust trauma are available. Particularly revealing in this context may be a comment on the perception of literatures of Eastern Europe in the West formulated in the PEN report. Its authors, having analysed the choices made by the English-speaking readers, stated that “the interest in the literary output of other countries is little more than a taste for the exotic,” claiming that most works from Eastern and Central Europe published in the United States speak of “victims of Communism, censorship and repression, and the economic slump in Eastern Europe that followed Soviet withdrawal” (PEN 2007: 43). It appears that such works match the expectations of the English-language readers, who still perceive Poland through the prism of the bygone era.

Figure 2 shows that in the past decade the three categories underwent significant changes. The number of translated classics fell, whereas contemporary authors gradually became more and more popular. In 2008, the number of contemporary works published surpassed the number of classics translated, an unprecedented event. These changes may be accounted for, at least to some extent, by the Polish Book Institute’s grants and subsidies. Publications subsidised by the Institute include primarily texts by contemporary authors, usually those nominated for the Nike Literary Award, one of the most prestigious Polish literary prizes. Another change that could be observed was a considerable rise and then fall in the number of translations of works devoted to the Second World War and Holocaust. The increase took place in 2005 and coincided with the ceremonies to commemorate the 60th

anniversary of the end of the WWII. Since 2005, the number of such translations was gradually decreasing. At present they occupy a peripheral position by comparison with the classics and contemporary prose.

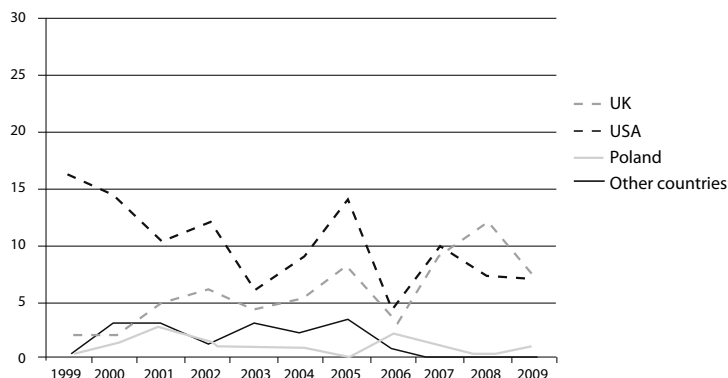


Figure 3. Polish prose in English translation according to the place of publication

As Figure 3 shows, at the beginning of the decade the number of translations of Polish prose published in the United States was seven times bigger than the number of translations in Great Britain. By 2009, however, the situation had changed considerably. In the UK the interest in Polish literature started to rise gradually and the British book market began to demonstrate a greater openness towards works translated from Polish, which may be partly explained by Poland's accession to the EU and the strengthening of bonds between Poland and Western Europe. One could argue that the increased interest in Polish literature in Great Britain may be a relatively steady tendency.

The data presented in Figures 1 to 3 allow three conclusions. First, the picture of Polish literature which emerges from the bibliographic data did not correspond to the situation on the Polish book market. For example, the percentage of poetry volumes and memoirs was much higher than in Poland. It proves that the choice of texts is affected not only by the aesthetic quality of a text, but also by external factors, such as the current situation on the book market, publishers' translatory policies, target readers' expectations and the prestige of a language from which a work is translated.

Second, the years 1999–2009 saw significant changes in the choices of titles. At the beginning of the decade the classics and testimonies to the Holocaust and the Second World War were most popular, whereas towards the end of the period recent titles by contemporary authors were published more frequently. This trend may be caused by the changing perception of Polish literature abroad as well as by the Translation Programme, which has supported publishers keen on producing contemporary Polish works. Third, in the period under consideration the British publishers started to become more interested in bringing out Polish authors. Their increased interest might have stemmed from closer links between Poland and the EU as well as the rise in the international value of the Polish language. Thus publishers could not only obtain EU grants for translations from European languages, but also revive the Western world's interest in Polish literature and culture.

**trans. Joanna Rzepa**

## **Polish literature in English translation 1999–2009: Alphabetical bibliography**

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